

The Biella Theses

A founding document towards a modern approach to the mountain

1. THE CONCEPT OF MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS

1.1 The notion of wilderness must incorporate certain psychological and ethical dimensions, above and beyond the common conception of nature in its savage state, untouched by human activity.

1.2 The term "mountain wilderness" thus refers to any untouched mountain environment where anyone who so wishes may come into direct contact with the wide-open spaces, experience solitude, silence, rhythms, natural dimensions, laws and dangers. The essential value of wilderness lies, above all, in its potential to stimulate an intense creative relationship between civilized man and the natural environment. It is the degree of authenticity of this connection that gives this adventure its deeper meaning.

1.3 The wilderness experience is particularly important to modern mountaineers who live in complex, compartmentalized societies, since it provokes a complete re-consideration of our civilisational structures. In fact, it can be a powerful antidote to the effects of a system that tends to level individuality, limit responsibility, manipulate needs and behaviour, and restrict personal independence.

1.4 Consequently, it is of fundamental importance to become aware of the numerous links that exist between ecological values on the one hand and ethics, aesthetics and behaviour on the other. The true significance of mountaineering in our over-civilised culture lies in the web of these connections.

2. DEGRADING OF THE WILDERNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

2.1 The mountaineering community and associations share the historical responsibility for the degradation of the Alps, as well as that of other ranges in other parts of the world. Even though such action was often indirect or involuntary, mountaineers cannot escape the blame for their collective actions. Neither indifference, nor ignorance, nor a lack of awareness makes for a legitimate excuse.

2.2 The desire, theoretically praiseworthy, to bring as many people as possible into contact with the unique experience of wilderness has led to the mountains being tamed, paradoxically, into safe, navigable territories. To meet the growing demand, new alpine huts have been opened, existing ones enlarged and fixed ropes, ladders and cables installed on certain routes, along with a host of other incentives to consumption. But this policy is short-sighted and is the consequence of some serious errors of judgement. It overlooks the fact that wilderness values such as solitude are the essence of the mountaineering experience. We believe that the construction and capacity of mountain shelters and huts should depend not on the demand of potential visitors, but rather, on the number of people that the natural environment can absorb without damaging the essential quality of the experience. Furthermore, we believe that permanent shelters and huts should not be built on climbing routes, nor near summits, nor on other sites where they would subtract from the savage grandeur of nature and the symbolic value of a pristine environment.

2.3 Mountain wilderness is also seriously threatened by all kinds of mechanical transport. The mountaineering community again underlines its opposition to the uncontrolled expansion promoted by the ski resort industry, given the combination of heavy infrastructure needs, the speculative nature of new initiatives and the cultural shallowness it promotes. Strict regulation of winter sports is urgently needed, nationally and internationally. In addition, it is important to ban, on the one hand, the use of helicopters for transporting skiers to higher altitudes, and on the other, the construction of new ski-lifts to reach summits, passes and glaciers, or to further link together valleys - eventually, any means of mechanical transport that could tarnish the beauty of nature or interfere with the alpine experience.

2.4 Even action that is not very harmful from a strictly environmental or aesthetic point of view may be harmful if it alters, limits or reduces the potential richness of the mountain experience. A series of fixed ropes abandoned on a mountain wall is all that is needed to rob it all of its mystery. Moreover, we are witnessing the spread of certain questionable attitudes toward the mountains - characterised by a new focus on consumer entertainment - that, even though not directly detrimental to the environment, seem to promote a view of the mountains as a mere backdrop for athletic, recreational and tourist activities.

2.5 We must also question whether the proliferation of technical descriptions and guidebooks represents

a potential threat to wilderness values, by considerably reducing the possibility of personal discovery and the incomparable satisfaction derived thereby.

2.6 We face a decrease of the mountaineering spirit, less visible but no less harmful than the physical degradation of the mountain environment. In this respect, mountaineers have a heavy burden of responsibility, specially those, who by dint of initiative and daring, have acquired a certain following among the amateur public. Their behaviour will be taken as a model, their example will be followed. It is useless to preach about the purity of mountain adventure and sign petitions for the defence of the wilderness if, when faced with the lure of fame, competitive distinction, or economic gain, one's actions are not absolutely consistent with one's words. Certainly, no mountaineer can presume to judge the inner motivations of other mountaineers, or criticise their choices by interpreting the free rules of the game as moral limits. Yet it is obvious that our credibility in defence of the mountain environment depends entirely on our coherence.

2.7 Unfortunately, this consistency has not been evident up until now, if one were to judge by the activities of many of the expeditions to the Himalayas or the Andes. The responsibility for the present deterioration of the wild state of these exceptional ranges rests on the shoulders of mountaineers and trekkers, even the best among them.

The time has come for the mountaineering community to tackle the urgent task of drawing up a strict code of behaviour, and seeing to it that it is respected.

2.8 In that sense, abandoning high-altitude camps and fixed ropes, and leaving behind or even simply burying garbage is very serious. Even if we are forced to do this in an emergency, each member of the expedition must later make an effort to erase any sign of his passage.

2.9 In arid mountain regions, and especially in areas beyond the last human settlements, expeditions must absolutely avoid using locally collected wood for fires. The frequent passage of mountaineering and trekking groups is causing the desertification of high-altitude valleys and the depletion of a precious mantle of vegetation that takes an incredibly long time to grow at such high altitudes. A single meal can cause the elimination of numerous small trees and shrubs, some of them centuries old.

3. MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS AND POPULATIONS

3.1 The repeated passage of large expeditions and the constant flow of hikers, is causing profound changes in the lives of local populations. These changes are especially seen in their level of material well-being, their attitudes, and their traditional culture. It is difficult to tell if these transformations are positive or negative since expert opinions vary. However, it seems reasonable to believe that the sudden influx of money and material goods – to which the young have more access – may have a destabilizing effect, introducing typically Western values into traditional societies unprepared to deal with them. Also, by leading to the decay of traditional lifestyles, contact with foreign expeditions can expose traditional societies to real economic crises should this new source of work and money be suddenly withdrawn. Added to this is the weak historical and anthropological background of most mountaineers that explains their difficulty in overcoming their own Western frames of reference in order to accept cultural differences, and respect them even when they seem incomprehensible. We hope the discussion on such matters will increase, and our understanding deepen. Nobody must remain indifferent to the possibility that his or her behaviour may cause the ethical, social or cultural deterioration of other populations, or even de-stabilised, ever so mildly, the lives of others.

3.2 The relations between mountaineering, in the broadest sense, and local mountain populations are too complex to be dealt with here in a meaningful and comprehensive manner. However, the problems posed by such relations are real ones, and the mountaineering community must be prepared to deal with them.

4. STRATEGY

4.1 The environmental measures adopted to date by mountaineering associations produced practical results that are either quite limited or altogether insignificant. There are two reasons that explain why this happened:

- a) these efforts have been sporadic and isolated, dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes of environmental problems
- b) these responses have been limited to verbal protests rather than concrete, active strategies.

4.2 It is time to take action. Mountaineers from around the world, gathered together at the Mountain

Wilderness Conference in Biella, would like to create a new type of organization or movement that will use courageous, unconventional and effective strategies for the protection of the last free spaces on earth. These strategies will include actions that are both concrete and at the same time highly symbolic, even invoking the utopian case, in order to heighten the "ecological" awareness of the ever-increasing number of "mountain users".

4.3 This international movement, born in Biella, is called MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS. Its headquarters have been established in Italy for the years 1988-89. The Biella Congress has elected 21 representatives who are responsible for constructing this movement by establishing its formal structure, by-laws, etc. They will appoint the officials who will direct its practical activities and will monitor the movement's progress to ensure that its objectives are pursued and achieved. These 21 representatives have been elected for two years.

5. SHORT AND LONG TERM OBJECTIVES OF THE MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS MOVEMENT

5.1 The movement hopes to influence organizations that deal with mountaineering and nature protection in different countries in order to :

- a) Encourage a change of attitude among mountaineers that will be more in accord with wilderness values (take a stand against the commercialisation of the mountains and discriminatory proselytising, and promote environmental sensitivity among young people, guides, mountaineering instructors and trek organisers).
- b) Make the environmental policies of such organizations more active and more effective by intervening to help them when they are disposed to envisage or accept initiatives closer to the wilderness spirit.

5.2 Proposals for actions should be a major part of the movement's activity. For example :

- a) Elaborate the concept, study the reliability and promote the creation of parks or protected zones in areas where mountain wilderness can still be protected, e.g., the Mont Blanc International Park, the Hohe Tauern National Park, several areas in the Dolomites that have not yet been permanently damaged...
- b) Encouraging alpine style mountaineering in the Himalayas and other remote ranges (light or ultra-light expeditions); recommending to local governments the adoption and enforcement of strict measures in case of insensitive/unacceptable behaviour of expeditions and trekking parties. In particular these measures should require the retrieval of garbage from mountain areas to appropriate designated sites.

5.3 The movement's permanent activities should include some highly symbolic initiatives such as :

- a) Eliminating or blocking the construction of infrastructure incompatible with wilderness values, for example, the Vallée Blanche gondola on Mont Blanc, the ski-circuit of the Mont Pelmo, ski-lifts on the Chavière glacier (in La Vanoise), the resort complex at Salève, and a number of cable-equipped hiking routes (via ferrata) in the Italian Alps... In particular, the movement plans to begin its activity in the defence of mountain wilderness with a highly dramatic action, committing its energies to removing the Vallée Blanche gondola on Mont Blanc.
- b) Encouraging the organization of a Himalayan expedition whose objective would be to restore an environmentally damaged site (the South Col of Everest, the fixed ropes on the Abruzzi Ridge of K2, etc.).

5.4 The movement plans to establish effective communications with the relevant governments and international organizations in order to achieve its goals. It especially intends to lobby for the strict regulation of mechanized transports in the mountains (aeroplanes, helicopters and ultra-light aircraft, Jeeps, motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles etc.), complete with the means for its enforcement and adequate penalties in case of violation.

6. CONCLUSION

The need to protect mountain wilderness is more urgent today than ever. That is why the Biella Conference has focused on certain concrete, short-term goals. But this conference has also motivated a larger awareness – an awareness that the protection of the mountain environment is only one aspect of protecting wilderness worldwide – that we must work together with all the organizations whose goal is the protection of the untouched zones on our planet, not only mountains but deserts, oceans, forests, ice caps... the protection of these zones from all forms of environmental degradations, including military exercises, nuclear experiments and radioactive wastes.

The mountains are part of the last remaining vestiges of wildness on Earth, and thus belong to the common cultural heritage of all mankind.

